

APPROVED

**CONSERVATION COMMISSION
SPECIAL MEETING
OPEN PUBLIC FORUM ON WOODSOM FARM OPTIONS
MONDAY, JUNE 1, 2015
62 FRIEND ST. CITY HALL AUDITORIUM**

MEETING CALLED TO ORDER AT 6:05 pm

PRESENT: Alan Corey, Steve Langlois, Michael Bik, Kinsey Boehl.

ABSENT: Suzanne Egan

ALSO PRESENT: John Lopez, Agent; Paul Bibaud, Recording Secretary

Kinsey Boehl: A little history, Suzanne and myself are on the subcommittee for the Conservation Commission. We basically invited the public to this meeting to discuss what Woodsom Farm offers us for value to the public, what it is the significance the city feels that Woodsom Farm offers. We'll develop a list of recreational values and perspectives from you the audience tonight, on how to improve the outdoor recreation at Woodsom Farm. The ConCom has invited John Atwood of Mass. Audubon, as well as Ed Becker from Essex County Greenbelt to help educate the commission and our audience tonight on the unique habitat and landscape recreational significance of Woodsom Farm. Woodsom Farm is not permanently protected in any way from the use that it currently has. So at this point, I'd like to invite the public to speak at the podium and give us your thoughts, speaking on what values you see in the property and how you use it for recreation and how those values might be improved through management changes.

Bernadette Lucas, 19 Unicorn Circle: This is a neat idea. I've heard about what Greenbelt has said, and I know what the Audubon has been thinking. My husband, Bruce Georgian and I, have been advocating for the protection of the bobolinks for about 8 years now. The plan we have now with this current administration is wonderful. The birds are being protected, and the mowing is being done responsibly. My main concern about the wildlife habitat that is there is that, if this administration changes, will we be right back to where we were? Typically, when they mow for hay, the hay ripens about 2 weeks before the birds fledge. So the farmer comes and mows and kills about 80% of the fledglings. So it is not at all good. Another thing is that this is a wonderful breeding ground. All these birds flock to this area and nest, but we kill them. So it has been a battle, and I look forward to seeing what Greenbelt can do for us to protect the habitat, and people can walk and enjoy the wonderful landscape. I'm also concerned about the watershed of the Powow River. I'm concerned about the 15,000 pounds of fertilizer that we put on ends up in the river, which ends up at Lake Gardner. Anyone who knows Lake Gardner knows there is a lot of weeds in it and it's a battle every year. So Woodsom Farm is a wonderful wildlife habitat, and serves as one of the best breeding grounds for bobolinks and meadowlarks in the state, with pristine land to enjoy, and hopefully we can keep it like this forever for our kids and grandkids. Thank you.

Ken Aspeslagh, 199 Market Street: I founded a group in town called Amesbury Trails. Our mission has many parts, but a main mission worked on this year is to be a resource for information about open space in town. After 5 years here, I've found this area lacking for information. We want to create a resource for open space and I've found many people don't really know anything about the protective status of the land that they enjoy. They don't know that Woodsom Farm is not a protected place. When that 365 acres of land was purchased, there was an unsuccessful effort to permanently protect it. Now 25 years later, I think after all this time, we've moved on from thoughts of developing it and now we're ready for a serious discussion about setting aside this land for recreational use permanently. We've set aside a nice chunk of it over by Cashman for soccer fields. That is settled. Now we should try to look forward to a conservation strategy and make the same kind of bold decisions that people made in the 80s that got us permanently protected land like Battis Farm, Powow Hill, Deer Island, etc. We take those for granted not, but we wouldn't have them if not for 54 bold decisions by people back then to lock in those lands as open space. I use Woodsom to walk with my kids, I have no dog, but still go there, use the swimming hole, mountain bike on the hills, cross country ski and snow shoe, so it is really important to me to know that this will stay open space forever. In my research on conservation land in town, I've noticed that we're often not utilizing it to its full potential. A place like Woodsom has a possibility for putting Amesbury on the map for open space, instead of leaving town to go to Maudsley State Park, or Plum Island / Ipswich River, or the beautiful place on Scotland Road with the sunflowers. Those are protected spaces that we take for granted as being a place that will always be there forever. These bring people in from the outside to experience these things, and Amesbury can be that place where people come to experience the beauty. I'm excited to have Greenbelt involved, because they have been working tirelessly since the 60s to protect land. Their expert stewardship would be important. Not to mention the importance of the wildlife and things like kayaking. Bobolinks are one of many really cool wildlife we have there. Developing the area as an educational opportunity to learn more about wildlife is important. Thank you.

Jon Higgins, 19 Elizabeth Street: I raised my kids here. My wife and I walk to Woodsom Farm frequently. Our primary interest is on habitat. I see it as a threatened grasscape. I encourage support for grassland species like bobolinks. We cross country ski in the winter. Thanks.

John Brooker, 2 Vine Street: I've lived in Amesbury since 1993. I'm an amateur bird watcher since then. About the bobolink: it is really an interesting bird. It is in the same family as a red wing blackbird. They have white wings, like a tuxedo worn backwards, and they have a gold crown. They show up mid to late May. The males rise off the ground and make a crazy virtuoso song. They migrate all the way from South America, a journey of over 2,500 miles. Right along their face, they actually have fine iron oxide, which is part of their feathers, and they use the earth's magnetic field to find their way from South America all the way up here to Woodsom Farm, and also Battis Farm, as well. They used to be a far more numerous bird in the U.S. back when all the land was cleared, especially in New England. But now that forests are filling in it is not as numerous. So habitats like grasslands and hayfields are critical for these birds, as well as

Savannah Sparrows. I just wanted to describe to you this remarkable bird. I encourage you to go over and check them out. Thank you.

Bruce Georgian, 19 Unicorn Circle: I see Woodsom as a unique place, dog walking, rocket shoot off area, cross country skiing, snow shoeing, kayaking, people running and biking. It's a place we do want to preserve. Anything that can lock in that preservation will be of great benefit, if we get more committed to building a reputation. Working with Greenbelt sounds like it could be an excellent support system for Woodsom, which would provide some assistance in managing it without the town losing any ownership or regulatory ability. The mowing of the birds is critical and clearly a challenge, there is a lot to manage to it. Its being done very well now. I was there today. It was loaded with bobolinks, they were super happy, and I was so grateful that we've done some negotiation with the town and worked something out that those birds today will be allowed to fulfill their nesting, their babies will fly away, and they won't be mowed down, the population will continue to thrive, because of work done in the past. I want to make sure that we take steps to make sure that this is an ongoing situation, and not something that is speculative every year and at great risk. Once it is identified and clearly labeled for the habitat and other uses, we can publicize it more. So it brings value to the town by having people go downtown after the farm and have a drink, eat a meal, etc. It's really nice. Thank you.

Nicole S. Lloyd, 115 Market Street: I wasn't going to speak tonight, but I thought of something that is really important. I walk at Woodsom Farm. The reason we bought our home here 26 years ago is because of Woodsom Farm. I was very impressed that the city would do something like that. When I walk there now, I walk dogs, I meet people from all over (Boxford, Haverhill, Lawrence), and they come here because there is no place like this. They don't just come there with dogs. They bring families, friends, etc. for skiing, snowshoeing, etc. To a certain degree, it is something of a missed opportunity, if we don't take advantage of it as a place that is really unique and beautiful. Thank you.

Dave Blake, 107 Elm Street, and I'm a tree hugger: I had no plans to speak tonight. I'm disgusted that this space to date is not protected. The question shouldn't be do we do it but how do we do it. I work in Portsmouth. Everybody always says, "your taxes in Amesbury are outrageous. Move to N.H. for no income tax or real estate taxes." I always tell them two reasons: Battis and Woodsom. I stay here because of them, and they are great assets to the town. I have dogs, I go there all the time. That is why it is so important to the community to keep these things in place. Thank you.

Bill Martin, 8 Woodwell Circle: As a dog owner, I'd like to talk about moving here 11 years ago. We didn't know about Woodsom. It was a pleasant surprise when we found Woodsom. We use it regularly to walk the dogs there. We'd hate to see anything happen that would remove that unique recreational component in Amesbury. We don't find equivalent opportunity as dog owners in the region to do something like this. People from all around the area, not just Amesbury, come there. I think it is a place that can be built upon, not just in conservation and environmental but also from the attractiveness of Amesbury, making it a jewel that represents the town. As for leash or off leash, there could be appropriate signs for areas that could be off leash. Just around the bend, there is a trail. You could easily start the off leash there. You could also have signage up in the

area to bring local businesses in to promote the area. We have a wonderful pub called the Barking Dog. It'd be great for them to draw people that come in from Haverhill or wherever to take part in the commerce of the town as dog walkers coming in. There's a wonderful pet store downtown. They might be able to help, with signage down there, with doggie clean up bags or whatever to make it a world class dog park. All the while, it isn't impacting the 365 acres that you have there. Its wonderfully safe for dogs there, with paths with space on either side of trails, so you're not up against a busy road, residential areas, etc. There is little risk to dogs, to families, and it is a wonderful social aspect. Dog owners spend time talking to other dog owners walking dogs. It's a great resource, and with proper management, you could actually build on it and make it into an even more of the jewel it already is. Thanks.

David Vialli, Powow Hill: We've been residents here for almost a year. Its great to see such a good turn out and people excited about the open space in town. It is one of the biggest reasons we moved here. So I was very happy to hear that the town is considering permanently protecting Woodsom Farm and so many people speaking eloquently on their strong support. I love the idea of protecting the natural resources, watershed protection for Powow River, drinking water, I see it as a triple bottom line: Socially, it adds vibrancy to the community, the health of people who go out there and recreate\exercise. Economically, we heard people speak of property taxes, and one thing I haven't heard discussed is cost of community services. There are lots of studies all over the country that if properties are developed, say for residential subdivision, there's a cost of that to the community, to install roads, to plow the roads, to provide water, sewer, etc. In a lot of communities, having open space like Woodsom Farm is a net benefit economically to the community and saving property taxes, which would be a hot issue here in Amesbury. Environmentally, we've all heard the benefits there, with the wildlife habitat and water resources too. So I'd definitely applaud and support permanent protection of the land, by putting legal restrictions on the property, deed restrictions possibly, that last forever and restrict certain types of uses that would be detrimental to the various things we value, like wildlife habitat, water resources, recreational component, etc. The town is doing a great thing, working with resources like Greenbelt and Audubon. They're professionals and know what they're talking about. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Steve Langlois, Chairman of ConCom: I just want to remind people that this is one of other meetings that we will have, but we need to move on in order to accommodate our planned ConCom meeting taking place after this forum. At this time, I'd like to invite Mass. Audubon and Greenbelt to give us their presentations.

John Atwood, Mass. Audubon: I am the Grassland/Bird Specialist for Mass. Audubon Society. My introduction to Woodsom Farm came about maybe a year ago when several of us were looking at areas in the region that were really important to grassland breeding birds. Woodsom Farm just popped right up to the top. There is no doubt this is an area of state wide and certainly regional importance for grassland bird conservation. So I'm here tonight to just act as a cheerleader for all of you, because everything that you all have said is what I would hope for this really important piece of property: both for conserving it from the standpoint of environmental and habitat issues, but also for those community functions that it serves. This is conservation in the real world. Mass Audubon is certainly

not interested and I doubt Greenbelt is interested in turning this into some sort of nature sanctuary that other uses don't get addressed. We want that too. So I thought I'd introduce some of the biology and some of the birds via several slides in a presentation.

The area we are interested in discussing is labeled on that slide WOODSOM FARM NORTH, which does not include the area near the southeast corner of that slide, where there is soccer and parking area, does not include the hill where fireworks are let go. Woodsom has all sorts of values, including watershed, uses that have to do with people coming with families and pets for picnics and recreation year round. There are important areas that function as grassland bird nesting areas, but also during much of the year for others. Some of the characters found here are grassland breeding birds that are a real special concern in the entire state of Ma. and in Woodsom Farm in particular.

The Eastern Meadowlark and the bobolink are of primary conservation concern. A colored slide shows vast areas in red, which were places that those two individual species are showing significant declines of about 2 % per year throughout the entire range. In the northeast, you might say "grasslands aren't really a huge part of the northeastern landscape. If farmers hadn't come in and cleared the land and take down trees and create farms, we'd have forests here. So we have to figure out ways to both keep farms active, because without the farming effort, the habitat goes back to forest. But, the very problem of keeping those farms active causes challenges for the birds. The hay cutting for farming occurs at the wrong time and nesting birds often get destroyed. Recently, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service and Smithsonian produced something called THE STATE OF THE BIRDS. Looking at their graph, you'll see a green line, representing grassland bird numbers in North America. This line is the strongest and most continuous decline. In Massachusetts, we're trying to figure out ways to cooperate with local towns, with state properties, federal properties, with Audubon's own sanctuaries, properties owned by other land trusts...we're trying to figure out how to address those grassland bird declines, and reverse that trend. We feel Woodsom Farm is actually a real anchor point for that effort in the state's northeast corner. We feel using Woodsom, we can recover grassland birds in this area. We've done work in the past where we identified portions of Woodsom Farm that are really critical we believe. We think the area may have more nesting bobolinks than almost anywhere else in the state. It has sizable numbers of eastern meadowlarks breeding there. Those birds have shown such strong declines in the state, maybe 80% declines in the state since twenty years ago, that there are some people saying "maybe we should put eastern meadowlarks on the state endangered species list." Well, Woodsom Farm is one of the places that we hope will make it possible for us to say "no, we aren't going to do that. We are going to recover and conserve this species without that drastic step."

One final note: This is an issue that we play a small part in. These are birds that spend a brief period of time with us, here in the northeast. Most of the time, they live in central or South America. So there is really only about a 10 or 12 week period where we can do very much to protect them. When they arrive here in mid May, and they breed until the first of August, that is the time, from a bird's standpoint, we ought to think about what that means. How can we conserve these birds during that period of time? Protection of

Woodsom, beyond that period, time is huge. We believe, when we found out that there was a sort of a movement that involved Essex County Greenbelt and other groups like that, very valued partners in land conservation, we were so excited to be contributing to that, and we as an Audubon Society, stand ready to offer our expertise and services to help make that possible. So I salute all of you and applaud your efforts. Thank you.

Ed Becker, Essex County Greenbelt: I'll be brief, because you've all said it so well. By way of a brief introduction, Greenbelt is a regional land trust, so we are your land trust working in this area. We are headquartered in Essex, but we work throughout Essex County and we are a non-profit organization. We've been involved in protection for about 16,000 acres, working with landowners who have visions for conservation, but we work with cities and towns who have properties like Woodsom Farms that they are considering for protection purposes. So we are a facilitator organization. If you all choose as a community that there is a vision that you have for this property, and you want to implement that vision, then we stand ready to work with you, as does Audubon, to help with that process. I have just a couple slides to share with you: One thing is there is a lot of precedent for what you're going through right now. Your decisions regarding the future of the property, how you want to use it, a number of communities have done this already. One example is shown here: just across the river in West Newbury, back in the late 1990s, culminating in 2001, they went through a similar process on Pipestave Hill. Its about 210 acres, with a lot of different aspects of the property, which is owned by the city. There are recreational fields, a forested landscape, mill pond, recreational area the pond, and that town went through the process of asking what do we want to do with this property and do we want to protect it? That started the process of organizing citizens, providing input, working with the open space committee, conservation commission, board of selectmen, and ultimately culminating a decision at town meeting to protect the property, and putting in place management plan. That has worked very well on that property as an example of how a community can make decisions, go through the process, and find ways/options to help you implement that vision you had to make it permanent in its protection, and you and your families have those features available to you. An example of how our organization works with the city, Pipestave Hill is a great place for these trail runs. So you get about 150 runners coming in every year in April or May, just as one example of multiple uses of that property that we see now. Another example going on at this moment is, we're working with the city of Beverly on about a 130 acre property around Norwood pond. Similar process, where the city owns it, and they are making decisions regarding what do we want to see in the future for this property, what are all the values that the public enjoys most there? In this case, from the standpoint of the public water supply, recreational trails, habitat, all those features are reflected in this one property. So again, we've been involved with the city in the process, with the open space committee, the ConCom, and in this case, as a city just like you, city council and the mayor, culminating in a decision to permanently protect that property. So lots of precedence for what you are going through here.

My final slide, just to show that there are lots of experiences and precedences for multiple use of property. Greenbelt owns over 250 properties, all available to the public free of charge. We have lots of experience in the stewardship of land. This is a photograph of

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our headquarters property in Essex. It illustrates that this is a property that is enjoyed by dog walkers. The field you see is managed for grass and birds. So that is part of the message we convey is that you can have it all. It takes careful management, but you have a resource there that would allow for that. Our organization stands ready to help you facilitate the implementation of whatever vision you decide for the property. Thank you.

Kinsey Boehl: I'd like to thank everybody for coming. This is just the first meeting on what we're going to do going forward, for augmented management programs for the property, see what is best for the citizens, and best for the city for continued preservation and multiple use for the property at Woodsom Farm. We will be having additional meeting similar to this, where we will discuss other topics as it relates to Woodsom. We talked about maybe July 13 or 20. They will be posted in the newspaper as a public hearing, and I encourage you to stay involved and thank you for coming.

The special open forum meeting on Woodsom Farm was adjourned at 6:48 P.M